Roman sewers and the politics of cleanliness

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Few of us today would think of recommending a city to others by dwelling on the ingenuity and efficiency of its sewer system. Not so the Romans. The *Cloaca Maxima* – the Great Sewer – was one of the highlights of Rome. The Greek historian Dionysius, who was from Halicarnassus, ranked the sewers as one of the three great marvels of the capital city alongside the roads and the aqueducts. Livy introduces the ancient *Cloaca* as a product of massive human effort, unmatched by the architectural grandeur even of *his* day – the dustbin for all the city's waste. His contemporary, Strabo, claims the sewers were a product of the remarkable foresight of the Romans, for ever washing the filth out of the city.

The city and its sewage

The *Cloaca Maxima* was the oldest and largest of nine sewers that served the ancient city. It was built (so tradition would have it) as early as the sixth century B.C., to drain the marsh upon which the Forum was established. By the early Empire it was carrying an estimated 100,000 lb of waste every day out into the Tiber. Pliny the Elder, author of the encyclopaedia, the *Natural History*, was proud of the Roman sewers for their scale and sheer durability: 'battered by massive blocks of stone, shaken by earthquakes, assaulted by falling buildings and the raging backwash of the Tiber – and yet they resist, forever evacuating dirt from the city.' They were impregnable like a fortress, subterranean vaults that transformed Rome into a 'hanging city'. Pliny imagines the *cloaca* as a gigantic military machine, an impressive and indispensable underbelly to Rome. The construction of the *cloaca* was, as Pliny puts it, the stuff of legends. He tells of how Rome's early king, Tarquinius Priscus, crucified the bodies of sewer-workers who committed suicide as an example to others that this extraordinary substructure had to be completed at all costs. For the historian, Livy, the sewers preserved for posterity the original layout of the city – the one part that survived the sack of Rome by the Gauls in 390 B.C. intact. With this idea he ends book 5: the sewers are a bridge between the old city and the new city.

As late as the sixth century A.D., the Roman politician and writer Cassiodorus remarked on the 'splendid sewers' as miracles which strike astonishment into the hearts of all beholders, great channels which bear witness to the greatness of Rome: 'what other city can compare with her in her heights', he concludes, 'when her depths are so incomparable?' Even today, the 2,500-year-old *cloaca* continues to function alongside Rome's modern sewer, and we can see entrances and outlets to this pervasive structure at key locations around the city. The *cloaca* was built to be noticed. Its architecture, both internally and externally, is extraordinary; the sewer reaches a maximum height of 3.3 metres and a maximum width of 4.5 metres, and was constructed in the shape of a vault. Large sections of the sewer floor were even paved with slabs of white marble, and the bronze fittings that held the slabs together are still visible. Successive emperors took it in turns to extend and improve the Great Sewer, so that the masonry visible today shows several distinct layers of architectural development. Along the Forum's 'Sacred Way', the location of the *cloaca* is clearly marked by a row of white marble slabs set into the black basalt street-paving. One major, highly visible access point was built into the side of the grand *Basilica Iulia*, and was overshadowed by the temple of Castor and Pollux. The *Cloaca Maxima* was a powerfully symbolic expression of monumental urban development as much as it served the practical needs of the city.

Venus of the sewers

Perhaps one of the strangest of this sewer's landmarks is a small round shrine in the Roman Forum immediately beside the portico steps of the *Basilica Aemilia*, marking the junction where a drain flowed from under the *Basilica* into the main channel of the *Cloaca Maxima*. This Republican 'crossroads'-shrine was dedicated to Venus Cloacina ('Venus of the Sewers'). This strange connection between the smelly sewers and the sexy goddess of love was just the tip of the iceberg. Waste management was promoted and celebrated in a broad range of Roman religious and political contexts. Near to the main outlet of the *Cloaca Maxima* into the Tiber, for example, a large Republican manhole cover was discovered depicting the face of a river god swallowing away the waste; this is now known as the *Bocca della Verità*, the Mouth of Truth.

We might also turn to an event in the religious calendar on 6 June, on which the temple of Vesta, goddess of the hearth, was ritually cleansed and the dirt cast into the sewer and out of the city. As Ovid explains, one should not marry before this date, until the Tiber has received the expelled dirt from the temple of Vesta, and carried it away into the sea. Vesta's flame should shine on a clean floor. Cleansing, purging, renewing, therefore, could be deeply ritualized. And in the Republic, we are told that it was the duty of the censor to clean the sewers at the same time as he cleaned up public morals. Even today, cleaning can be a symbolic or ritualistic process – as one anthropologist put it, 'in chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea'. For the Romans, cleanliness was more literally next to godliness; to control dirt was to reach the state of purity and order that was the cornerstone of the Roman religious and political system.

Flushing the system

This cultural preoccupation with dirt-control filtered into the language and metaphors of Latin literature and political oratory, and one striking example is that of Cicero's *Catilinarian Orations*. In 63 B.C., Cicero squashed the conspiracy of Catiline with a masterful display of rhetorical invective. This was no easy job; Catiline was a leading Roman noble and a popular politician, and Cicero needed to get rid of him. Cicero calls him every name under the sun: a gladiator, a wild beast, a parricide – metaphors that place Catiline at the very edges of Roman identity. No metaphor offered a more potent means of segregation, however, than that of disease, dirt, and sewage.

In the first speech, delivered to the senate and to Catiline himself, Cicero orders Catiline to leave and cleanse the city – 'purge the city!' Rome will be free from fear only if there is a

wall between him and them. Catiline is *pestis* ('disease'), but more often he and his followers are *sentina* ('waste or sewage'): 'But if you, as I have long been urging, get out, the great and destructive waste of the state – your accomplices – will be drained out, right out of the city …'. Cicero leaves us in no doubt as to what he thinks his role as consul is when it comes to this 'matter out of place' – his job is to put it very clearly back in place, that is *outside* the city. Immediately after this passage, he states: 'the consul orders the public enemy to get *out*, *out* of the city'. Catiline is the enemy within, a figure that needs putting in his place. Cicero ends his first speech with a memorable simile about disease; this disease must be expelled and isolated in its entirety. Wicked men must get out, separate themselves from good men, and gather in one place so that there is a wall between us and them.

Speech two is in part a celebration of success. Catiline is gone, departed, escaped, exposed, and expelled – although Cicero is professionally committed to the idea that there is more purging to be done. For the moment, he proudly announces that the city seems to rejoice because it has 'spewed forth' such a great disease and cast it outdoors. He imagines a future city purged of all Catiline's cronies: 'O lucky state, if it manages to evacuate this sewage from the city'. With Catiline alone 'drained away', the state already seems relieved and refreshed. The metaphor leaves little to the imagination. It is the job of his consulship, as Cicero puts it a few sections later, to remove all these men – the city's 'unclean'.

Plumbing the depths

By plumbing the depths of Rome's sewers, we can learn a great deal about the cultural and political symbolism of dirt-control in the Roman world. Dirt and uncleanness offered Cicero a powerful image with which to think about the Catilinarian conspiracy. Describing Catiline as sewage is not just a playground insult – dirt was one of the most basic units of the human environment that required and demanded attention. And attention it got. In both political metaphor and urban architecture, Rome developed and paraded the machinery of dirt control. The *Cloaca* extended beneath the heart of the city; it began under the Argiletum – a seedy commercial street – then flowed under the forum, gathering waste from tributaries from the Esquiline, Viminal, and Quirinal Hills, and discharged it into the Tiber.

One major collection point was the middle of the Subura, the grubby Soho quarter of ancient Rome; here, Juvenal tells us, was the innermost recess of the *cloaca*. Plautus' play *Curculio* sets the prostitutes, perjurers, and fish-markets of Rome – the bits most in need of cleaning – against the backdrop of what was then an open sewer canal, and the shrine of Venus Cloacina. Suetonius imagines the evil emperor Nero washing his bloodied hands in the sewer after his nocturnal brawls, and the body of Elagabalus (an early third-century emperor whom the sources construct as a second Nero) is pictured being dragged 'most sordidly through the sewers'. And from the Capitoline Hill, a sewer channel symbolically washed away the filth from the city's prison into the *Cloaca Maxima*.

Roman dirt existed to be cleaned up. The prominence of the sewers in Roman literature, in the archaeological remains, in the strange shrine to Venus Cloacina, and in the metaphors of political debate and speech-writing all attest to the intellectual currency accorded to dirt and the control of dirt in Roman life.

Mark Bradley teaches Classics at the University of Nottingham where he is working on a larger project on dirt and pollution in the Roman world. If you are keen to learn more about sewers but would rather not brave the real thing like Mark, try www.underome.com, the website of 'Roma Sotterranea, an institution dedicated to the exploration of underground Rome'.